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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [SMIG](#) [ELAB](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [LH](#)

SUBJECT: LITHUANIA'S NEWEST IMMIGRANTS

REF: A) VILNIUS 1029

B) VILNIUS 962

C) 04 VILNIUS 1522

D) 04 VILNIUS 1493

1. SUMMARY: Immigration to Lithuania is increasing, with foreign workers filling gaps in the local economy as Lithuanians continue to emigrate in large numbers. Countries of the former Soviet Union, notably Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, are the primary source of Lithuania's immigrants. With some exceptions, immigrants appear to integrate fairly well into Lithuanian society, although more as a result of their small numbers than efforts of the GOL. Immigration has to date not significantly affected Lithuania's religious or linguistic balance. While its modest immigration system has thus far served the country well, Lithuania is not yet prepared to deal with the inevitable immigration pressures to come. END SUMMARY.

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General Immigration Trends  
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2. Lithuania's immigration system does not clearly distinguish between foreigners who intend to reside in the country temporarily and those who wish to do so on a more permanent basis, making it difficult to track the number of immigrants entering Lithuania. This system, in sharp contrast to our own, is likely the result of Lithuania's general inexperience with large immigrant inflows. The Statistics Department estimates that 3,571 people immigrated to Lithuania from January-July 2005, a figure dwarfed by the large number of Lithuanians currently departing the country (net migration for 2004 stood at an estimated -9612). These numbers are not precise, however, and several other measures indicate general immigration trends.

3. Foreign nationals wishing to reside in Lithuania for any significant period of time (regardless of purpose) must obtain a temporary residency permit from the Lithuanian Department of Migration. The total number of issued residency permits has consistently increased in recent years - 6,559 in 2004, 5,604 through September of 2005. The Migration Department has issued the most residency permits in 2005 to citizens of the following countries:

Russia - 20.59%  
Belarus - 15.58%  
Ukraine - 13.70%  
United States - 6.07%

4. Lithuania's visa issuance statistics are also useful in analyzing the country's immigration trends. According to the MFA, the GOL issued 339,303 visas in 2004. Citizens from the following countries accounted for nearly 98% of visas issued:

Russia - 59.9%  
Belarus - 24.6%  
Ukraine - 6.1%  
Kazakhstan - 5.2%  
Kyrgyzstan - 1.5%  
Moldova - 0.5%

5. Although not including most European and American visitors (who do not require visas), these statistics indicate that Lithuania remains an especially attractive destination for foreigners from the former Soviet Union.

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Foreign Workers  
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6. Increasing emigration following Lithuania's 2004 accession to the European Union has forced the country's employers to turn increasingly to foreign workers to fill in the gaps in the local economy (Refs B-D).

7. The Lithuanian Labor Exchange is responsible for approving work permits for foreigners seeking employment in

Lithuania. Through the first three quarters of 2005, the GOL issued 1077 temporary work permits and refused only 55. The number of issued permits has consistently increased over the last several years. In 2005, 95% of Lithuania's temporary foreign workers are men, and 67% are between 25-44 years old. The vast majority (82.9%) of foreign workers are employed in Vilnius or the bustling port city of Klaipeda. The following is a breakdown of foreign employment by sector:

Manufacturing - 59%  
Services - 15%  
Construction - 13%  
Transportation - 10%

18. Lithuania has signed bilateral agreements with Russia and Ukraine that allow citizens of these two countries some additional working rights. The Labor Exchange has issued the most temporary work permits in 2005 to citizens of the following countries:

Ukraine - 35%  
Belarus - 26%  
Russia - 12%  
Romania - 12%

19. The following are a few of the largest categories of foreigners who have obtained work permits in 2005:

Occupation	(Nationality)	% of Total
Ship/dock workers	(Ukraine, Belarus, Russia)	33%
Specialized welders	(Belarus, Romania)	12%
Truck drivers	(Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Georgia)	9%
Chefs	(China, Turkey, Armenia, the Philippines)	7%
Chemical/aviation engineers	(Russia, Belarus, USA)	6%

10. Xiaomin Feng and Hongwei Zheng, a Chinese couple who have lived in Lithuania for 8 years, are a true success story among Lithuania's immigrants. Invited to Lithuania by an uncle who owned a Chinese restaurant in the city of Kaunas, Xiaomin and Hongwei quickly began developing a chain of successful restaurants - they now own and run four in two different cities. Hongwei described their first years, without any knowledge of the language or culture, as truly "scary." Now very much integrated into Lithuanian society, the pair enjoy their lives away from China and have no intentions to return anytime soon. But the Lithuanian immigration system, according to Hongwei, discourages permanent immigration, forcing the couple to acquire residency permits yearly and denying any possibility to become Lithuanian citizens.

#### ----- Integration -----

11. Most immigrants to Lithuania, perhaps due to their small numbers, appear to integrate fairly well into society. Exceptions exist, however, most notably several geographical pockets of ethnic Russians who have failed to integrate despite lengthy periods of residency.

12. The Lithuanian government has established a national integration program "to promote national minorities to integrate into the society of Lithuania, to foster tolerance among the public, to prevent discrimination, seclusion, and hatred on an ethnic basis." The Department of National Minorities, which takes the lead in implementing the integration program, focuses its efforts on minority groups present in Lithuania for at least 20 years. The program works primarily with Lithuania's domestic Roma community, not recently arriving immigrants. The Ministry of Social Security and Labor, meanwhile, provides some integration assistance to asylum seekers but very little to ordinary immigrants. Lithuania grants refugee status to only a handful of asylum seekers, and provides temporary social protection to 200-500 people, each year.

13. Oleg Beloborodov, a Moldovan construction worker in the Vilnius region, is a positive example of the integration process. Oleg's occupation allows him to communicate perfectly well on the job in Russian. Yet, in the year since his first arrival, Oleg has begun to speak some Lithuanian, and he is already a popular figure among Lithuanians in the Lithuanian Baseball League.

#### ----- Political Influence -----

14. Immigrants in Lithuania have little political influence compared with immigrant communities in other European countries. Ethnic Poles and Russians, themselves usually

long-term Lithuanian citizens, have had only limited success in organizing themselves politically. The Polish Electoral Action, an electoral coalition, united Polish, Russian, and Belarusian politicians for the October 2004 elections with hopes of creating the first ethnic faction in Parliament. The effort failed, although Voldemar Tomashevski, leader of the group and prominent Polish politician, did succeed in reaching Parliament.

15. Former immigrants, and others from ethnic minority groups, have gone on to hold high political positions, demonstrating society's general acceptance of minority figures. Viktor Uspaskich, controversial but popular leader of Parliament's leading political party, moved to Lithuania from Russia in the mid-1980s. Vaclav Stankevicius, born in Belarus, is the chairman of Parliament's NATO Affairs Commission and as MP was a champion of Lithuania's NATO accession.

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Religion  
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16. Lithuania's immigrant population has done little to disturb the country's religious balance. Lithuania remains an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country with very small religious minorities. According to the most recent survey data, 79% of residents are Roman Catholic, 4.1% Russian Orthodox, 0.8% Old Believer, and 9.5% are nonreligious. Lithuania's ethnic Polish minority reinforces the Roman Catholic dominance. With countries of the former Soviet Union serving as the primary source of immigration, immigrants and temporary foreign workers in Lithuania are predominantly Russian Orthodox and nonreligious. The Orthodox Church remains an uncontroversial force, given its long history and physical presence (in the form of attractive onion-domed churches) in Lithuania, while decades of living in the Soviet Union have left most Lithuanians comfortable with agnostics.

17. Muslims remain a statistically miniscule portion of the population (less than 3,000 total, according to the latest census). Most of Lithuania's Muslims are from the Tatar community, which settled in the region over 600 years ago, practice a very moderate form of Islam, and are considered part of mainstream Lithuanian society. Some foreign Muslims, notably young students, have begun to fill the country's few mosques. Not yet exposed to significant immigration from the Muslim world, however, Lithuania is one European country where Islam and religious extremism (Ref A) remain largely abstract concepts.

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Language  
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18. Almost all Lithuanian adults speak fluent Russian, and Russian-speaking immigrants from the former Soviet Union therefore have an advantage in the Lithuanian job market. However, language use in Lithuania is changing drastically, with younger generations learning English and other European languages rather than Russian. Increased immigration may help perpetuate the use of Russian in this former Soviet outpost.

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Comment: A Naive System  
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19. The GOL has designed an immigration system to allow for a limited influx of foreigners to fill the gaps for specific needs in the Lithuanian labor market. Permanent immigration is envisioned primarily for family of Lithuanian citizens only and not for "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

20. This system has worked well to date, bolstering Lithuania's growing economy without disturbing the country's social and cultural balance. As Lithuanians continue to leave their country in startling numbers, and as Lithuania continues its impressive economic growth, however, it is likely that immigration pressures will continue to grow.

21. (SBU) Zygimantas Pavilionis, Director of the MFA's EU Department and long-time observer of European politics, noted during discussion of Turkey's bid for EU membership that Lithuanians have thus far not faced a large immigrant population with drastically different cultural values. Becoming a full member of Europe would therefore require a gradual "education period," he opined, for Lithuanians to become accustomed to larger-scale immigration. While immigrants continue to play a positive role, Lithuania will inevitably have to tackle the challenges of immigration that today beset Western Europe.

